

Meade. p. 314.

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A PORTRAIT OF GENERAL GEORGE GORDON MEADE

THE name of George Gordon Meade will always be a prominent one in American history. Every American knows that Meade commanded at Gettysburg and that if Gettysburg did not end the war, it at least checked Lee and his victorious army in the full march of triumph so decisively that they never again ventured on vigorous offensive action.

Also, the circumstances of Meade's leadership at Gettysburg much increase his claim to admiration and gratitude. To take a beaten army from a beaten commander and at three days' notice win a victory over troops like Lee's under a general like Lee was a task that demanded most distinguished qualities of soldiership. This task was imposed upon Meade against his wish; but he accepted it and showed courage and character and brains thoroughly adequate to the occasion.

Yet he remains one of the secondary figures of the war. Men remember anecdotes and phrases and experiences of Grant and Sherman and Sheridan. Of Meade they know nothing but the name. Though nominally in command of the Army of the Potomac until the end, at the great historic scene of Appomattox he was not even present. As a person he is hazy, obscure, hardly distinguished from the multitude. It is of extreme interest to study the causes of this neglect in the nature of the man; and the delightful material now supplied in abundance by the general's recently published *Life and Letters* makes such a study as easy as it is profitable.

The course of Meade's whole biography is clearly elucidated in this ample chronicle, his faithful effort at West Point, where he was graduated in 1834, at the age of nineteen, his patient labor in his vocation of engineering, his creditable service in the Mexican War, his steady advance in the Army of the Potomac until he reached its leadership, and the eclipse of that leadership under Grant during the last year of the war. Meade's admirable letters, chiefly addressed to his wife, reflect all his daily experience, his triumphs and successes as well as failure and discouragement and disappointment.

The careful examination of these records, in connection with other testimony, shows many qualities that were calculated to lead to success. In the first place there was a sane and healthy desire

for it. It is evident that Meade, like other normal men, longed passionately to get on in the profession he had adopted. "In military matters, as in all things else", he says, "success is the grand criterion by which men are judged."¹ When he feels that he has chosen the wrong path and has missed some golden opportunity, his regret is bitter: "I tremble sometimes when I think what I might have been, and remember what I am, when I reflect on what I might have accomplished if I had devoted all my time and energies to one object, an object where my exertions would have told in my advancement."² On the eve of a great battle he inspires himself with the thought of what victory will bring: "I go into the action to-day as the commander of an army corps. If I survive, my *two* stars are secure, and if I fall, you will have my reputation to live on."³ And he has a clear and sober consciousness of having deserved such promotion as is likely to come to him. "If most faithful attention to those duties for nearly a year preceding, and activity and energy such as (though I say it myself) have attracted attention from various officers, entitle me to the advancement of one grade . . . then I can safely appeal to my brother-officers for my credentials in this case."⁴

And the natural corollary of ambition, sensitiveness at being unduly postponed to others, is by no means wanting. A great clamor was raised before Antietam over Reynolds's removal, which put Meade in Reynolds's place. Meade, thereupon, hotly protested that the urgency to have Reynolds back was a slight to him and that if Reynolds came he should insist on being relieved.⁵ The analysis of Meade's state of mind during the last year of the war, when Grant and Sheridan were crowding him out of public notice, is of extreme interest. Recognizing always, with inherent magnanimity, the fine qualities of both generals, never uttering one word of public protest, he yet shows clearly to his intimate correspondent the keen susceptibility he cannot overcome. "You may look now for the Army of the Potomac putting laurels on the brows of another rather than your husband."⁶ When at last, after the war, the supreme military honor is awarded to Sheridan instead of to himself, his sense of justice revolts in language which shows how deep was the disappointment. "My own sweet love, you can imagine the

¹ *Life*, I. 99.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

⁶ *Ibid.*, II. 178.

force of this blow, but . . . we must find consolation in the consciousness . . . that it is the cruelest and meanest act of injustice, and the hope, if there is any sense of wrong or justice in the country, that the man who perpetrated it will some day be made to feel so."⁷

On the other hand, what is most winning about Meade's ambition and desire for success is the moderation and perfect candor that temper it. Cheap notoriety, the current advertising of the newspapers, he detests and will make no effort to obtain it or cater to it. Hasty promotion, reward beyond his deserts, he does not desire, rather deprecates it, as bringing later mortification and regret. Even when things seem to be going against him, he recognizes that it is the fortune of war. "I don't mean to say I have not been badly treated, but I do mean to say I might have been much worse treated, and that my present *status* is not without advantages, and does not justify my being discontented."⁸ What could be finer than his attitude on the first advent of Grant? "I believe Grant is honest and fair, and I have no doubt he will give me full credit for anything I may do, and if I don't deserve any, I don't desire it."⁹ While no man ever expressed personal ambition more finely than this quiet soldier in the early days of his campaigning, "I hope the people of the country will appreciate what we have done, and for myself individually, if I get the approbation of those in whose hearts I wish to live, it is all that I ask."¹⁰

Also, Meade had other qualities that make for greatness more substantially than the mere desire to attain it. He had everywhere and always the deepest sense of duty. When there was work to be done, he was ready to do it, no matter how unsavory or distasteful. Grant bears witness to his subordinate's unfailing earnestness and he adds further that Meade was able to take the plan of another, even when he did not approve of it, and carry it out as zealously as if it were his own. Those who have made some study of the history of the war, North and South, will appreciate how rare a quality this was.

And with the instinct of duty went that of sacrifice. The general would sacrifice private feelings. Even when his child was dying, he would not leave his post. He would sacrifice public advancement. "Sedgwick and Meade", says Grant, "were men so finely formed that if ordered to resign their general's commissions and take service as corporals, they would have fallen into the ranks

⁷ *Life*, II. 300.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I. 140.

without a murmur."¹¹ And he goes on to relate how Meade came to him, when he arrived in the East, and offered to give up his position to any other officer that Grant might prefer.

How deeply this instinct of duty and sacrifice was founded in patriotism is understood when we read what Meade has to say about his failure to attack Lee after Gettysburg and again at Mine Run. His military judgment may have been at fault in one or both of these cases, but at least his determination not to be driven from what he thought right by any storm of popular clamor is forever admirable and to be imitated. His own expression of this is so fine that I quote it at length: "It will be proved as clear as the light of day, that an attack was perfectly practicable, and that every one, except myself, in the army, particularly the soldiers, was dying for it, and that I had some mysterious object in view, either in connection with politics, or stock-jobbing, or something else about as foreign to my thoughts, and finally the Administration will be obliged to yield to popular clamor and discard me. For all this I am prepared, fortified as I said before by a clear conscience, and the conviction that I have acted from a high sense of duty, to myself as a soldier, to my men as their general, and to my country and its cause . . . having its vital interests solemnly entrusted to me, which I have no right wantonly to play with and to jeopardize either for my own personal benefit, or to satisfy the demands of popular clamor, or interested politicians."¹²

In addition to these qualities of moral character, which are certainly helpful to greatness, Meade had intelligence of the highest order. His mind was perhaps not so vividly and restlessly active as Sherman's; but it was far more tranquil and far better balanced. It was perfectly capable of sympathy with all sides and with all interests of life. Though his early and constant preoccupation with practical matters left him little time for purely intellectual pursuits, it is evident that he turned to such pursuits by natural instinct. In one of his letters he expresses deep regret at being cut off from the enjoyment of music. In another he shows genuine literary sense by his criticism of the detestable jingle of *Lucile*, then running its brief course of popularity.

In everything relating to the practical affairs of life, the calm lucidity, the broad balance of Meade's intellect make themselves constantly and gratefully felt. When vigor and decision are needed, he is always ready for them. There is no doubt or questioning when doubt and questioning are out of place. Thus, though he dis-

¹¹ J. R. Young, *Around the World with General Grant*, II. 299.

¹² *Life*, II. 158-159.

approved totally of the Mexican War from a political point of view, he felt that, once in, we should prosecute it with all the energy of which the nation was capable. "Let us show a bold and united front, forget *party* for an instant; now that we are in the war, prosecute it with all possible vigor, not in talk but in acts . . . let [Mexico] see we are determined to carry everything before us; and you may rest assured that if she is ever going to make peace, she will do it then, and not till then."¹³ Yet this zeal and efficiency in action are always tempered by a really remarkable power of rising above the immediate present, of seeing things in their larger aspects and their manifold phases, of recognizing the good intention and earnest purpose of an adversary, even when you are opposing him with all your might. No man fought the war with steadier conviction than Meade. But no man showed a larger or more sympathetic tolerance and charity before the war and during it and after it.

So in military matters, what distinguishes Meade above everything else and gives him his lasting claim to respect, is brains. It may be remarked that this was the claim of Von Moltke, also, who is considered to have been something of a general. It was not that Meade had a vivid and fertile imagination, but he saw possibilities, weighed them, and adopted or rejected them on all their merits. He was "not original in devising brilliant plans", says Colonel W. R. Livermore, "but his clear understanding enabled him to discriminate between the plans of others."¹⁴

Of course intelligence, in excess, has its grave military dangers. It is not always well to see all the possibilities too clearly. Meade himself, with that gift we all have of sooner or later defining ourselves, says somewhere, "I am a *juste milieu* man."¹⁵ Now a *juste milieu* man, one who keeps the middle of the travelled road, sometimes balances too well, sometimes errs by excess of caution, sometimes hesitates to take the chances which one blinder or less far-seeing would take in ignorance and come out with dazzling triumph. It was this weakness, if it was a weakness, which induced Meade to provide for the possibility of retreat from Gettysburg and kept him from attacking after the battle, this which prevented him from pursuing Lee with the headlong vigor which the nation thirsted for, this which brought upon him the reproach of Halleck and the pleading of Lincoln. "If General Meade can now attack him [Lee] on a field no more than equal for us", wrote the President, "and will

¹³ *Life*, I. 181.

¹⁴ *Story of the Civil War*, III. 495.

¹⁵ *Life*, I. 162.

do so with all the skill and courage which he, his officers, and men possess, the honor will be his, if he succeeds, and the blame may be mine, if he fails."¹⁶

To this appeal Meade answered, "It has been my intention to attack the enemy, if I can find him on a field no more than equal for us, and that I have only delayed doing so from the difficulty of ascertaining his exact position, and the fear that in endeavoring to do so my communications might be jeopardized."¹⁷ It may be that too keen intelligence in the apprehension of possibilities here did the general an injury, but, I repeat, he at least showed splendid courage in acting on his own judgment alone and not surrendering it to any pressure from others.

Also, there are those who believe that that judgment was usually correct, and who agree with General Hunt as to Gettysburg in particular, "He was right in his orders as to Pipe Creek; right, in his determination under certain circumstances to fall back to it; right, in pushing up to Gettysburg after the battle; right, in remaining there; right, in not attempting to counter-attack at any stage of the battle; right, as to his pursuit of Lee."¹⁸ It may be added that it has never yet been shown and perhaps never can be shown that, if Meade had been supported as Grant was and supplied as Grant was, he would not have accomplished quite as much as Grant.

What is most of all attractive about Meade's intellectual make-up is his absolute candor. There is no bluff, no swagger, no pretension, no attempt to throw dust in the eyes of posterity. He debates and analyzes his own mistakes just as freely and frankly as he would those of another. And when one has read thousands of pages of self-justification by great commanders on both sides, one appreciates how rare such candor is. Take this admirable passage from the official report of the Mine Run campaign, in which the general discusses the arguments for and against his own conduct as calmly and earnestly as if he were pleading in the naked, quiet chamber of his conscience. "It may be said I should not depend on the judgment of others, but it is impossible a commanding general can reconnoiter in person a line of over 7 miles in extent, and act on his own judgment as to the expediency of attacking or not. Again, it may be said that the effort should have been made to test the value of my judgment, or, in other words, that I should encounter what I believed to be certain defeat, so as to prove conclusively that victory was impossible Considering how sacred is the trust of

¹⁶ *Official Records*, series I., vol. 29, pt. II., p. 332.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

¹⁸ Quoted by Walker in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, III. 412.

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the lives of the brave men under my command, but willing as I am to shed their blood and my own where duty requires, and my judgment dictates that the sacrifice will not be in vain, I cannot be a party to a wanton slaughter of my troops for any mere personal end."¹⁹

With these great moral and intellectual qualities, which should have ensured success and glory, Meade unfortunately combined some others that were less helpful. The latter were not in themselves all positive defects, indeed very much the contrary. Some of them were the most charming elements in the general's character and remind one forcibly of the words of Shakespeare,

"To some kind of men
Their graces serve them but as enemies."

For instance, all through Meade's career we find a singular modesty, almost amounting to self-distrust, and this is a trait so rare in Civil War history, as to attract attention and admiration at once. I have now spent fifteen years in the study of these practical natures who did things, either in war or statesmanship, and I begin positively to thirst for spirits of another type. The achievement of great matters brings out splendid qualities, keen insight, quick decision, the neglect of slight things for what is truly essential. But it also develops and necessarily requires a self-confidence which, repeated in a thousand various phases, becomes intolerably wearisome. The highest order of genius, Lincoln's or Lee's, can do things without this self-assurance; but in greater or less degree it is apt to permeate practical minds of a narrower type.

Now Meade was as modest as Lincoln or Lee, and in his position undue modesty kept him out of the public view and gave others much less deserving a chance to elbow past him in the race for honor.

Not that Meade was without a proper pride and just sense of the value of his ability and achievements. In the midst of later disappointment and discouragement, his heart thrills when he thinks of Gettysburg. Even his enemies, he says, acknowledge that Gettysburg was one of the greatest victories the world has ever seen, though some of them believe it would have been greater if he had not been there. And he frankly declares that, "As I reflect on that eventful period, and all that has elapsed since, I have reason to be satisfied with my course, and cause to be most thankful. The longer this war continues the more will Gettysburg and its results be appreciated."²⁰

¹⁹ *Official Records*, series I., vol. 29, pt. I., p. 18.

²⁰ *Life*, II. 210.

Nor was he inclined to underrate himself as compared with others. He playfully deprecates his wife's enthusiasm, declaring that he is no more than a common soldier doing his duty; yet lest she should take him too closely at his word, he adds with just and manly dignity, "One thing, however, I am willing to admit, and that is, that I consider myself as good as most of my neighbors and without great vanity may say that I believe myself to be better than some who are much higher."

But no man was more ready to admit his own deficiencies. As we have seen above, when he failed he did not waste a moment forging excuses or unloading blame on to others. He went right straight to the causes of failure and if he found them in himself, he said so. When he receives honorable mention, he notes that there is a great deal of accident about it and that many who missed it have done quite as much as he. When he is put forward prominently as the victor of Gettysburg, he points out that chance has its mighty share in all great victories and that he had better abstain from bragging until his future is more secure. And I have met with few commanders on either side who could have penned the simple sentence in which he recounts one of his adventures with Lee. "This was a deep game, and I am free to admit that in the playing of it he has got the advantage of me."²¹

Finest of all, as illustrating this natural instinct of self-distrust, is Meade's shrinking from supreme command. Everywhere one finds men hurt and injured, because not entrusted with positions equal to their merits; but the instances of those who had rank enough and feared more are rare indeed. Meade was certainly one of them. It is not only that he balked when the command of the Army of the Potomac was actually thrust upon him. The boldest might have done that under the circumstances. But months before he writes to his wife in the most intimate frankness of self-confession: "Your anxiety lest I should be placed in command of the army causes me to smile. Still, I must confess when such men as Gibbon say it is talked about, it really does look serious and alarming; yet, when I look back on the good fortune which has thus far attended my career, I cannot believe so sudden a change for the worse can occur as would happen if I were placed in command."²² The absolute sincerity of this cannot be questioned and to turn to it from the loud petulance of so many who are eager to better themselves is like stepping from the clatter of cities into the quiet of green fields.

And as he was too modest to thrust himself into the glare of

²¹ *Ibid.*, II. 154.

²² *Ibid.*, I. 351.

glory, so Meade had another grace inimical to the greatest success of a soldier; he was a lover of peace. It is worth noting that none of the men of the very first rank on either side in the war were of the roaring, swashbuckler type, which prates about the pleasure of fighting in itself. Grant and Thomas, Lee and the two Johnstons, were quiet gentlemen. Sherman was certainly not quiet, but he was anything but a boisterous roarer. And so far Meade is in excellent company. But he differed from all these I have named in that he took little or no pleasure in his profession, in fact found it positively distasteful in all its aspects. "He was not a soldier by instinct",²³ says Colonel W. R. Livermore, and only repeats what Meade was constantly saying himself.

Understand me. I do not for a moment suggest anything so absurd as that Meade was lacking in personal courage. He had probably as high moral control over any physical timidity as a man of such sensitive temperament ever possessed. Splendid anecdotes are told of his coolness in action and by some who were not favorable to him. Read Butterfield's account of his sitting quietly at the crisis of Gettysburg, with the shells bursting all about him, telling stories to the young officers of his early adventures and experiences. "The world might naturally suppose that with the immense responsibility so suddenly placed upon him unsought and unexpected, Meade might have been a trifle nervous or excited. If he was, he never betrayed it."²⁴ Read, again, Horace Porter's description of the general in battle, his sharp, ringing orders, his intense energy of carriage and movement, his quick comprehension of the conduct of all his subordinates and intelligent adjustment of their action to each other.

Yet, if you examine his heart carefully, as it is laid bare in the long process of his correspondence, you will agree with Colonel Livermore that he was not a soldier by instinct. Why, even at the beginning he went to West Point as it were by accident and against his inclination. He had none of the drum-and-fife fever which makes so many boys soldiers before they know it. He was a thinker, a scholar. The drill at the Academy, the endless repetition of technique, indispensable but monotonous, bored him unspeakably. He longed to be out of the army before he was fairly in it. Years later, in Mexico, he enlarges with energetic disgust on the same tedious features of actual military life. "A camp where is no active service is a dull and stupid place, nothing but drill and parades, and your ears are filled all day with drumming and fifeing. All this is very

²³ *Story of the Civil War*, III. 495.

²⁴ Julia Lorrillard Butterfield, *Memorial of General Daniel Butterfield*, p. 128.

pretty for such as have never seen it, but fifteen years of such business takes off the edge of novelty."²⁵

He was delicate in health, too, and the hardships of camp life were a trial to him. He bore them without complaint, but he grew infinitely tired of them. "Do not be frightened about me, but the sight of two gentlemen so sick, with no friendly hand near them, no accommodation of any kind whatever in a flimsy tent, made me feel badly, not only for them, but for myself, in anticipation of being similarly situated. Still, I trust I shall keep well, and if taking care of myself will do it, I am certain of it." He does not seem much exhilarated with the enthusiasm of a soldier's career, does he? And in Mexico, where this was written, in the prime of strength and vigor, he grows so homesick, so stricken with longing for home and the presence of those he loves, that he is only prevented from resigning by the thought that honor will not allow him to do so in the face of approaching conflict.

Honor only, you observe; for all the excitement, all the inspiration, which so many soldiers feel in actual battle, was apparently omitted from Meade's composition. The fighting fury of Jackson and Sheridan and Stuart, the intoxication which even Lee indicated when he said, "It is well that this is so terrible, or else we might grow fond of it",²⁶ seem utterly foreign to this quiet scholar who fought as he did problems in arithmetic. There was little spirit of adventure in the man who wrote, "Before Colonel Cross's death it was usual for the officers to ride in all directions, hunting and for exercise, but I never went more than two miles, always with a party, and always on open ground, where I had a fair view of every thing around me."²⁷ Falkland, whom Meade in some points resembles, could not, in Clarendon's strange phrase, *ingeminate* "Peace! Peace!" with a more thirsty longing than did Meade at an early period in the war. "Peace—oh, what a glorious word, and how sweet and delightful would its realization be to me!"²⁸ And one sentence sums up this whole attitude of mind with conclusive emphasis. "I like fighting as little as any man."²⁹ You will agree, I think, that this is a singular utterance for a great soldier.

Besides these attractive qualities, modesty and the love of peace, which unfitted him for popular military success, Meade had one positive defect, and that was his inability to win men. He had a few

²⁵ *Life*, I. 35.

²⁶ J. W. Jones, *Life and Letters of General Robert E. Lee*, p. 208.

²⁷ *Life*, I. 67.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

warm friends, he had the esteem of many; but his officers generally did not love him, even when they trusted him, and he had no faculty whatever of inspiring an army with that personal enthusiasm which, while it may not bring victory without great generalship, is almost essential to give great generalship permanent triumph.

This lack of gift for dealing with his subordinates did not come from insufficient judgment or insight. On the contrary, Meade's calm, clear, just intelligence shows in nothing more than in his fine appreciation of the characters of men. This appears admirably, so far back as the Mexican War, in his comments on his fellow-officers. It shows still better, during the Civil War, in all that he writes of the great number of distinguished soldiers with whom he was brought into contact. His judgments of McClellan, of Burnside, of Hooker, remain perhaps the most illuminating of any that we have, not exempt from severity, where severity is required, but absolutely free from jealousy and inclining to emphasize good qualities wherever possible. This recognition of the good is especially noticeable with Sheridan and Grant, whom Meade had certainly no reason to love, but whom he analyzes with the most kindly and generous discrimination.

It is possible that Meade read men too well to be popular with them. The first lesson of practical life is that to be on good terms with people we must treat them as if we thought a little better of them than we really do. Though Meade was thoroughly democratic in principle, it is not certain that he cared very much about being on good terms with the generality. It is certain that he was not one to disguise the truth for the sake of being on good terms with anybody.

Whatever the reason, he had friction with too many. Perhaps his difficulties with Sickles and Butterfield were natural. They were men of an altogether different stamp from him. But he quarrelled with Warren—and made it up, quarrelled with Sheridan, even with the amiable Burnside, and did not make it up. There were others with whom he did not quarrel, but who simply felt that they would much prefer to serve under somebody else. And this is not a favorable state of mind in war. Little things often indicate great defects. I know nothing that better reveals Meade's tactlessness than General Schaff's excellent account of the general's horse. The animal had one of those gaits which are neither a walk nor a trot and make it impossible for others to keep pace with him—a "fox-walk" General Schaff aptly calls it and adds that members of the staff were often heard to say, "Damn that horse of Meade's! I

wish he would either go faster or slower.”³⁰ I fear that Meade rode through life at something of a fox-walk.

Also, it is pretty substantially proved that under extreme stress his nerves would break in abominable fits of temper. We read of the great Condé, that in ordinary converse he was harsh and rough with his subordinates, but that under fire his manners were restrained into an exquisite courtesy. Just the opposite appears to have been the case with Meade. At the mess and the campfire he treated his staff like a cultured gentleman, but in battle, especially if they brought bad news, he rated them as if they were schoolboys, swore, if need be, and in general so comported himself that no one approached him if it could possibly be avoided. “A battle always put him in a fury”, says Grant. “He raged from the beginning to the end. His own staff officers would dread to bring him a report of anything wrong. Meade’s anger would overflow on the heads of his nearest and best friends.”³¹

Meade’s biographers reject evidence of this sort coming from Grant and Grant’s followers—for instance, Dana and Horace Porter—as somewhat suspicious. But there are plenty of other witnesses. General Schaff has no prejudice against Meade; yet he, too, writes: “I have seen him so cross and ugly that no one dared to speak to him,—in fact, at such times his staff and everybody else kept as clear of him as possible.”³²

The most reliable written evidence we have of this weakness of Meade’s is his savage communication to Burnside at the time of the mine disaster. “Do you mean to say your officers and men will not obey your orders to advance? If not, what is the obstacle? I wish to know the truth and desire an immediate answer.”³³ To which Burnside not unnaturally replied: “I have never in any report said anything different from what I conceived to be the truth. Were it not insubordinate I would say that the latter remark of your note was unofficerlike and ungentlemanly.”³⁴ And thus the reply churlish breeds ever the countercheck quarrelsome.

When I read all these things, I turn to Meade’s portrait, and begin to understand it. The high intelligence is under the high forehead. The stern brows and eagle nose mark the unquailing courage. There are lines of sensitiveness, lines of possible sympathy. But it is not the face of a man men love.

³⁰ *The Battle of the Wilderness*, p. 42.

³¹ Young, *Around the World with General Grant*, II. 249.

³² *Battle of the Wilderness*, p. 41.

³³ *Official Records*, series I., vol. 40, p. 142.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

A medical officer came to Meade at some not very fortunate moment and complained that the soldiers were calling him "Old Pills" and he wanted it stopped. Meade clapped on his great eyeglasses, glared furiously at the complainant, and snarled, "Well, what of that? How can I prevent it? Why, I hear that, when I rode out the other day, some of the men called me 'a d—d old goggle-eyed snapping turtle.'"³⁵

A d—d old goggle-eyed snapping turtle! A man had ever so much rather be called the savior of his country, hadn't he? But these soldiers are so keen-sighted and so abominably frank!

The ill-temper, the irritability, however, were only superficial, only the outcome of overwrought nerves stretched to the point of cracking. Everyone recognizes that after such a crisis the general was most eager and cordial in his expression of regret. Moreover, General Schaff adds that "As the campaign progressed, with its frightful carnage and disappointments, his temper grew fiercer";³⁶ and this explains not only any apparent inconsistency in the anecdote of coolness at Gettysburg above narrated, but much besides. It reminds us that Meade was working under difficulties that would have strained a far more phlegmatic disposition. After he had held for months the sole command of that magnificent army, the government became dissatisfied and he was suddenly subjected to the control of Grant, a control kindly exercised, but galling, to say the least. If the head of the Army of the Potomac wished to leave his post for a day, he was obliged humbly to beg permission of his superior. Such outbursts of wrath as he poured upon Sheridan are perhaps inexcusable. They are quite explicable when we consider that Sheridan was so supported by the higher authorities, that he had the impudence to speak to his nominal commander in the following fashion. "I told him that since he insisted on giving the cavalry directions without consulting or even notifying me, he could henceforth command the Cavalry Corps himself—that I would not give it another order."³⁷ For such a reply in any European army the impetuous Irishman would have run considerable risk of being shot.

Through all these immense difficulties, in spite of superficial irritation, Meade bore himself with a fundamental patience and dignity which we cannot fail to admire. Again and again he declares his humble, earnest wish to do his duty and his utter disregard of personal advantage. No finer letter was written during the war than that in which he expresses to Halleck his willingness

³⁵ Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant*, p. 248.

³⁶ *Battle of the Wilderness*, p. 40.

³⁷ *Personal Memoirs of General Philip Sheridan*, I. 368.

to be treated as a mere instrument for the welfare of the cause all were desirous to serve. "I take this occasion to say to you, and through you to the President, that I have no pretensions to any superior capacity for the post he has assigned me to; that all I can do is to exert my utmost efforts and do the best I can; but that the moment those who have a right to judge my actions think, or feel satisfied, either that I am wanting or that another would do better, that moment I earnestly desire to be relieved, not on my own account, but on account of the country and the cause."³⁸

So we return to what is attractive about Meade, to what is charming; for however unapproachable he may have been in official relations, no one can read his letters without being drawn to him, without feeling a singular attachment for one so simple, so large-hearted, so sincere. It is very curious that you might study the biography carefully without getting the least intimation of faults of temper, and this seems to indicate that these faults were somewhat less radical than many would have us believe. The only hint of anything of the kind is the sharp scene with a newspaper man, where temper was surely justified, if ever. "I asked his authority; he said it was the talk of the camp. I told him it was a base and wicked lie, and that I would make an example of him, which should not only serve to deter others from committing like offenses, but would give publicity to his lie and the truth."³⁹ And he ordered the offender paraded through the army, with a placard stating that he was a "Libeler of the Press".

On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence that in general social intercourse Meade could be very attractive. His broad and trained intelligence made his conversation full of interest. His manners were easy and courteous. And General Schaff emphasizes the peculiarly sensitive, refined, and sympathetic quality of his voice.

But it is in his family relations that the general's charm is felt most. His letters to his wife have not one atom of sentimentality, but they have unusual tenderness, sympathy, winning warmth of affection. Every detail of his children's growth and education interests him and his longing to be with them is sometimes so great that he is almost ready to forget duty and even honor. "At night, when I thought of seeing you and my dear children . . . I would be almost crazy, and determined the next morning I would go and get my leave."⁴⁰ His respect and esteem for his wife show in the habit of referring every question, even those military, to her sym-

³⁸ *Official Records*, series I., vol. 27, pt. I., p. 109.

³⁹ *Life*, II. 202-203.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I. 38.

pathy and judgment, and his deep devotion expresses itself often in passages like the following: "Do you know, to-day is our wedding-day and my birthday. Twenty-one years ago we pledged our faith to each other, and I doubt if any other couple live who, with all the ups and downs of life, have had more happiness with each other than you and I."⁴¹

The intimate self-revelation of these domestic letters shows in the writer of them a singular simplicity and single-heartedness, which are quite irresistible. Like many men of great intellectual power, Meade seemed to analyze himself with as perfect frankness as he would have done anyone else. I have already indicated this in regard to military matters, but it is even more attractive as to personal experience. When he is about to be set aside, he notes the fact with entire candor of acceptance. "My time I suppose has passed, and I must now content myself with doing my duty unnoticed."⁴² When a great crisis is at hand, he sets down quietly his own fears and tremors: "Sometimes I have a little sinking at the heart, when I reflect that perhaps I may fail at the grand scratch; but I try to console myself with the belief that I shall probably do as well as most of my neighbors, and that your firm faith must be founded on some reasonable groundwork."⁴³ But the most charming illustration of this personal candor is the general's comment on Reynolds. Few men would let such a remark go beyond their own conscience and many would not be honest enough to admit it even there. "As yet the order has not been issued, but when it comes I shall subside gracefully into a division commander, though frankness compels me to say, I do wish Reynolds had stayed away, and that I could have had a chance to command a corps in action. Perhaps it may yet occur."⁴⁴ And again, in a little different connection, "I envied Reynolds when he left for Harrisburg, and secretly thought the Governor might have applied for me."⁴⁵ Now that I call a ravishing bit of human nature.

The truth is, Meade could afford to be frank, because he had nothing to conceal. Few men have built their lives upon a broader foundation of dignity, of purity, of courage, of faithful devotion to duty. His religious interests are certainly neither obtrusive nor excessive. But they were evidently very deep, very genuine, and very vital in their influence. At times they become almost

⁴¹ *Life*, I. 241.

⁴² *Ibid.*, II. 229.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, I. 219.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

naïve, as when he inclines to think that his leg was saved by special interposition of the providence of God. But usually there is a grave and solemn earnestness about them which admirably fits the solid, loyal temper of the man. "I thought, too, of how I was preserved then and since in many perilous times through God's mercy and will, and prayed He would continue His gracious protection to me, and in His own good time restore me to you, or if this was not His will, and it was decreed that I was to be summoned, that He would forgive me, for His Son's sake, the infinite number of sins I have all my life been committing."⁴⁶

One bitter sentence, wrung from Meade in the hour of neglect, deserves particular attention. "Don't worry yourself about this; treat it with contempt. It cannot be remedied, and we should be resigned. I don't believe the truth ever will be known, and I have a great contempt for History."⁴⁷ This is contrary to what is usually asserted. Most slighted heroes console themselves with the thought that history will set everything right. Will it?

Without going too much into the general question it may surely be maintained that there is always some cause for a great reputation. When a man is lauded by his contemporaries and by posterity, there is some reason for it. What is puzzling, and what seems to justify Meade, is that the cause is so often inadequate to the result. A man may have splendid gifts, gifts of the highest value to the world, and be known only to few, while one who has a fine figure and a tongue and can drink a cocktail cordially may get laurels and a statue. It was something so with Meade. He had a dozen great qualities. But because he had not the faculty of drawing men after him, he must stand not only behind those who had that faculty with others, as Lee and Sherman and Sheridan and Thomas, but even behind those who had that faculty and little else, as Hooker and McClellan.

He was simply the man who fought Gettysburg. After all, History takes note of that.

GAMALIEL BRADFORD.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 276-277.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, II. 271.

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